

Reinventing (with) Theory in Rhetoric and Writing Studies: Essays in Honor of Sharon Crowley. Andrea Alden, Kendall Gerdes, Judy Holiday, & Ryan Skinnell (Eds.). Utah State University Press, 2019

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Book Review

Alden, A., Gerdes, K., Holiday, J., & Skinnell, R. (Eds). (2019). *Reinventing (with) Theory in Rhetoric and Writing Studies: Essays in Honor of Sharon Crowley*. Utah State University Press.

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This collection of essays in honour of Sharon Crowley is a compelling model and a useful tool for a critical and inclusive Writing Studies. Commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion means understanding, confronting, and redressing our normative privilege; it means standing up, saying it like it is, offering something new, and persisting in our critiques. Sharon Crowley, this collection confirms, was one such rebel with a cause. She fought for socially-just writing instruction for college and university students in America, which was inextricable from her advocacy for visibility and equity for the disciplines and people of composition, rhetoric, and writing studies. Crowley's concept of theory as rhetorical invention unites this provocative, moving collection of essays edited by four graduate students who celebrate her "reputation in the field as a 'consistent contrarian'" (p. 5). It is important to note that they also say that she would not necessarily have seen herself that way. Most of us would agree, nonetheless, that the world looks different once you have been Crowlied. My favourite line of the introduction is as follows: "this book moves in some unexpected—maybe even uncomfortable—directions. Bearing in mind the goals at hand, we consider that one of its chief merits" (p.7). This book shakes things up; it disrupts white privilege. It is also a survival manual for hope.

The collection of essays embodies Crowley's theory of rhetorical invention as the simultaneous re-inscription and disruption of power by showing how rhetorical invention plays out in contexts of race and privilege. The authors of the 18 chapters that apply Crowley's theory to contexts demand that we see and act in new ways, use new language to counter racism. A thread endemic to our field and to Crowley's work is the offering of new language to anti-theoretical positions often espoused in

or about areas that are deemed to be doing the practical work of teaching writing. This collection reinvents the sustained erosion of rhetoric and writing studies and the still feminized contingent labour pool teaching freshman composition courses under substandard working conditions.

True to Crowley's theory of rhetorical invention, the 18 Chapters resist stasis; the five Parts are themselves inventive. The editors explain that they "tried to arrange [the Parts] kairotically, creating a space for each inventive contribution to resonate with related work and with readers" (p.7). That is, they resisted naming the Parts, honouring Sharon Crowley by inviting resonance unchained. In chaining things, just for a moment, I name each Part. In the spirit of Crowlian rhetorical invention, I summarize more than analyze each Chapter so readers of *Discourse and Writing* might experience an array of unique disruptions and inspirations.

Front Matter or Honouring Sharon Crowley

The front matter is heart-warming and frames Crowley's key argument that theory is perpetual rhetorical invention. "A Blessing" is offered by Jim Simmerman in the shape of a poem about binding moments. There is a tender, personal note to the editors' summary of Crowley's definitions of theory in the Introduction, "Methodically Re/membering Theory." In the "Foreword," Bruce Horner lays out some characteristics of composition's "vexed relationship with 'theory'" (xi), meaning something like discourses of suspicion about theory within composition. But, despite anti-theoretical sentiments, he says, the appeal of theory is "not as disseminated entity—that is, as noun—but as verb: something we do, even when we don't recognize ourselves as doing it, and even when others fail to acknowledge what we do as theory" (xii), what he later calls "embodied practice" (xiv). The Chapter contributors put Crowley's theories of invention into action.

Part I or Defining Theory

Crowley's proposition of theory as performative is explored in Chapter 1, "The Remains of Theory: A Manifesto," wherein Diane Davis argues that theory happens "in the dark," by which I think she means that we invent from spaces and places in which we cannot necessarily see or feel agency. She explains invention as a Derridian deconstruction, a self-deconstructive "in(ter)vention," that needs theory to remain inconclusive. The take-away, as with deconstruction generally, and with Butler's performativity is the reciprocally embodied inevitability of re-inscription and invention.

Chapter 2 records an interview with Crowley at her home by the editors, Andrea Alden, Kendall Gerdes, Judy Holiday, and Ryan Skinnell. Titled, “Beliefs and Passionate Commitments,” the interview acts as a first step in theorizing this collection. It is at once deeply intellectual, witty, outright funny. It is one of my favourite chapters because I can “hear” both Crowley and the editors. Crowley says “fuck” (p. 18) in reference to a story she tells about “two older gentlemen” who wanted to take her for coffee after a conference paper. A must read. If you need additional convincing, she refers to drinking beer as a way to handle professional pressure post-tenure (p. 29). Crowley is unapologetically political and personal. She believed she should have written another book, “which is a rhetorical of emotion-how do we enact desire in rhetoric, use desire, how we manage it if that’s even an option” (p.29). The best feature of this chapter is reading Crowley’s theories through her own retrospective sense of them.

Part II or How I Learned More about Racism

One of the most powerful chapters, Chapter 3, makes racism visible, really visible, and, thus, useful pedagogically. In, “The Fallacy of Reason,” Dawn Penich-Thacker uses Crowley’s concept of “ideologic” to interrogate the rhetorically and institutionally entrenched invocation of “objective reasonableness” that sees white police officers shooting unarmed black men with impunity. This chapter unpacks the concept of reason, focusing on “reasonable use of force” through case studies.

Similarly, in Chapter 4, Judy Holiday offers a poignant account of a talk given at her university by Claudia Rankine about “the ubiquity of racism” (p. 51). Rankine was surprised, in her research of #BlackLivesMatter, to find a discrepancy between audience perception of police motive for shooting and police officers’ motives. Most assumed the officers would say it was because they were afraid. But most of the officers answered that they didn’t know why they fired. Holiday uses this compelling account of Rankine to frame her work on the concepts of episteme and intersubjectivity using some of Crowley’s concepts of Aristotelian grammar. This chapter is an essential read because it demonstrates the power of language to act on people and could be transformational in a classroom. An innovative analysis of the ways in which institutions are rhetorical is offered by Ryan Skinnell, one of the editors, in Chapter 5. He notes that “in rhetorical studies we have not developed detailed institutional theories to explain how they get the right to speak, how they exercise that right, how they convey the right to speak, how they exercise that right, how they convey the right to speak to other institutions and individuals, and how institutions shape discourse in powerful and distinct ways” (p. 70). He uses Crowley’s concept of “doxa,” common sense within a community, to examine

writing studies as “inextricably bound to institutions” (p. 71). He positions rhetorical studies and writing studies in relation to the term, “institutional rhetoric” whilst also working to refine it methodologically.

Mentoring is the focus of Chapter 6, wherein Lalicker, McDonald, and Wyche note that mentoring itself has not been adequately theorized, let alone rhetorically theorized. They examine the sophists as mentors, using Crowley’s theory of mentoring generally and of mentoring in this profession. This is a poignant chapter, written by the authors in first person narrative and detailing intimate conversations at “Sharon’s” home about taking things in from mentors and using them later.

Part III or When People (and People who are “Othered”) Invent

The chapters in Part 3 address re-invention by individual and collective agents. Chapter 7, “Reflections on Being ‘Against Audience’ with Sharon and Others,” by Victor Vitanza, theorizes the relationship between writer and audience. It is a reaction to a conference experience in relation to Crowley that is difficult to understand because it reads as a post-modern, pulp-fiction-esque journey that examines writer/audience co-dependency through Nietzsche, Christ, and Kenneth Burke.

Play as invention is explored by Daniel-Wariya, in Chapter 8, more specifically the classroom as a play space, as a site of game-based pedagogy. He notes that disciplines have their own definitions of play, presents a useful summary of play theory, and nuances ways in which theories of play intersect rhetoric and writing. He is mindful of inclusion, arguing that we should be skeptical of ideological assumptions about play and student learning which may not result in learning for students with different backgrounds and experiences.

Writing centres as sites of “ideological intervention” are the focus of Chapter 9. Hilst and Disrud argue that writing centres are sites of invention because they present opportunities for people to change their minds, due to the dialogic and “unhurried” nature of interaction over ideas. Crowley’s work with invention as Aristotelian, as “finding all possible arguments” (p. 135), is invoked to examine ways that writing centres open up conversations and inspire transformation. This chapter is useful for thinking about ways in which we might continue to foster such conversations in writing centres and ways we might substantially enhance conversationality in university classrooms.

Chapter 10 is unsettling, because Kristi Cole speaks of the very real potential demise of rhetoric, composition, and writing studies which she attributes to labour in composition, labour that operates from a “discourse of need” (p.151) that forces compositionists to be complicit in a system they fight against. The chapter exposes the still deplorable labour conditions facing a still feminized field that

is still largely invisible within the academic landscape through three “contemporary contexts for composition in the university: austerity, ‘madjuncts,’ and gender equality” (p. 157). The notion of a “madjunct” is reminiscent of Susan Miller’s composition as a mad woman in the basement.

Part IV or Let’s get Physical, Theoretically Speaking

The chapters in this section focus on rhetoric and bodies, useful especially for performance studies and rhetoric of health. Reminiscent of Chapter 8, which focuses on play as rhetorical invention, Chapter 11, by Jennifer Lin LeMesurier, discusses performance as rhetorical invention through rhetorical potential found in emotion felt through dance; “Feeling is not an obstacle to be overcome but a key mode for communication” (p. 167). She reports on ethnographic research of dance training and describes how dance teachers speak of rhetorical potential in their discourse about body movement.

Using Crowley’s notion of invention as having ideological and performative dimensions, Chapter 12, by Blake Scott and Catherine Gouge, corrects misperceptions of theory as separate from or counter to practice. This chapter on theory building in health cites scholars in Canada, notably Judy Segal, Phillipa Spoel et al., and Jay Dolmage, showing their work as examples of theory building as an act of care.

The authors of Chapter 13, Jason Barrett-Fox and Geoffrey Clegg, call for a theory of invention that incorporates materiality as well as discursivity. They “piggyback” (p.196) on Crowley’s understanding of Aristotelian rhetorical invention by exploring “matter’s voices” in two ways, the bio-informational and the ecological. Readers may be inspired by and appreciative of this interdisciplinary take on invention that might open up ways of theorizing materiality that are less antithetical to social constructivism.

Bre Garrett, in Chapter 14, pays homage to Crowley’s attention to bodies as subjects of rhetorical attention. The author points to Crowley’s naming, in 2002, of “Body studies in rhetoric and composition” mostly in relation to subject position. Garrett proposes “an embodied theory of rhetorical invention” (p. 211) wherein bodies are considered *topoi*.

Part V or Experiences I Couldn’t See or Hear

The chapters in Part 5 offer rhetorical angles that are often elided. For instance, Crowley’s theories of desire are taken up in Chapter 15 by co-editor Kendall Gerdes, who argues that desire operates as

invention of a future not yet imagined because it is outside the realms of available means of persuasion, something like performativity and the abject. The author offers elements of queer theory as theoretical lenses through which rhetoric might explore the relationship between “desire and availability” (p. 232), antisociality, and utopianism.

In Chapter 16, David Holmes expands on a point Crowley makes within her critique of the religious rights’ apocalyptic rhetoric, that it taps into pathos better “than has the rhetoric of classical liberalism” (p. 243). Holmes explores pathos, noting that versions of prophetic rhetoric that are not apocalyptic “possess sociopolitical and communicative potential” (p. 243) as a way to offer truths of communities whose voices are marginalized.

Oleksiak, using aspects of queer theory, explores the conundrum of change and the way it plays out in composition. Rhetorical negotiation and success in composing, he argues in Chapter 17, require openness, but powerful systems of belief “refuse to hear disconfirming narratives” and close negotiations (p. 256). Oleksiak calls for queer rhetorical listening, which signifies a stance of openness and suspends refusal to hear. “Non-identification is a place of personal agency,” (p. 259); which is to say that rhetorical listening means noticing non-identification and making deliberate rhetorical space to be open to others.

Matthew Heard, in Chapter 18, tells a powerful personal story of his experience as a foster parent and of his son as a rhetorical inventor. Heard’s “dimness” metaphor arises from the idea of “weak theory” as that which lacks the security to be considered widely generalizable, often chaotic, invented contextually. He thinks of his son as having to use weak theory to piece together his life, and of their new life together as invention. Dimness is something like uncertainty, and invention is something like faith.

End matter or “Candor, Feeling, Edge” and “The Pull”

Deborah Hawhee, in the “Afterword: Feeling and Historiography” uses two headings to sum up Sharon Crowley: “Candor, feeling, edge” and “The pull.” In “Candor, feeling, edge,” she recounts her experiences as a graduate student, remembering that Crowley was “as candid as they come, and her candor bristles with feeling” (p. 280). Hawhee also says Crowley had an “edgy delight” (p. 282). Hawhee lists a long line of frank or humorous article titles that say it like it is, for instance, “‘What Shall We Do with the White People?’” There are more where that came from; this collection is a must-read to the final page. The “Appendix of Sharon Crowley’s Publications by Year” is five pages of her tenacious body of work punctuated by playful titles.

Hawhee's second heading in the Afterword, "The pull," leaves us with a call to action, imploring us to listen, to do better, to follow the pull of history to articulate its implications for contemporary times, and to attend to "professional and scholarly feeling" (p. 285). During the editors' interview with Crowley described in Chapter 2, Crowley says if she had written another book it would have been a rhetoric of emotion. How I would have loved to have read that book. Crowley's work unapologetically evokes emotion because her theory of rhetorical invention seeks to disrupt privilege and power that kills and damages people. Her work is a call to action in our classrooms, our institutions, our communities and families to perpetually reinvent.

References

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